



Another Fresh Look at the Four Lepers as Subaltern Characters in 2 Kings 7¹

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1. Introduction

Characters in biblical stories live on in the reader's mind as if they were real people. Baruch Hochman argues that "a work of literature is an entity made up of things not there, a conjuring of absent nonexistent parts." Indeed, characters exist as autonomous beings, not merely as a plot function.² This focus on characters has led biblical scholars to appreciate literary artistry of

1 This article is a revised and abbreviated version of Chapter 3 of my doctoral dissertation (Graduate Theological Union) that was submitted on May 2018. The present article has added the implication of this study for OT scholars who seek to interpret 1-2 Kings with a fresh angle.

2 Alice Bach, "Signs of the Flesh: Observations on Characterization in the Bible", *Semeia* 63 (1993), 71.

biblical narratives³ more exuberantly than ever before. However, people tend to pay attention to major heroic figures, neglecting minor characters as a background against which the main ones stand out.⁴ It seems that there are several reasons for our inclination to rivet attention to major figures of biblical stories. First of all, much more space is devoted to describing their words and deeds. Secondly, their standpoints are designed to guide our reading of biblical stories with the help of many other textual details. Thirdly, they are dominant speakers at very critical junctures who steer the course of events. In proportion to the dominant position of these major figures, minor or nearly absent figures are pushed to the margin of attention. It is this familiar way of reading of the Bible that has occasioned a subaltern reading of the Bible.

The present paper aims to define and illustrate what subaltern biblical interpretation is about with a close reading of a set of subaltern characters in 2 Kings 7 through the lens of socio-literary methods: subaltern studies and literary studies of minor characters. The following paragraph will provide a brief examination of each methods and their interdisciplinary interactions. It is inevitable that attention to the edges or margins of a story leads to a concern with the reality of the least of the society, an interest in subaltern studies.

2. Subaltern Studies and Literary Studies of Minor Characters

In the disciplines of cultural and literary studies, subaltern theory has

3 Concerning the general understanding of biblical narratives in the OT and narrative criticism, see Dohyung Kim, "Narrative Criticism and the Structure of the Primary Narrative (Genesis ~ 2 Kings) in the Old Testament", *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 23.4 (2016), 155-191.

4 Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible and Its World* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2008), 86.

been enlisted to criticize elitist power and discourse as well as to present subalterns as active subjects of history and political movements. John Beverley argues that “subaltern studies represents theoretically the subaltern/dominant relationship”⁵ and “acts itself as a theoretical-political project within the academy.” Beverley defines subaltern studies as an academic form of alliance politics through which people committed to the cause of social equality and emancipation can work together.⁶ He also refers to subaltern studies as a secular version of the “preferential option for the poor,” which is a major concept in liberation theology.⁷ Beverley writes, “It [subaltern studies] shares with liberation theology the essential methodology of what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls ‘listening to the poor.’”⁸ In a nutshell, subaltern studies seeks to acknowledge “the need for a radical change in the direction of a more democratic and non-hierarchical social order.”⁹ According to David Ludden, subaltern studies¹⁰ began its career at the end of the 1970s, when a small group

5 John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 17. Beverley argues that “what subaltern studies can or should represent is not so much the subaltern as a concrete social-historical subject, but rather the difficulty of representing the subaltern as such in our disciplinary discourse and practice within the academy.” *Ibid.*, 1.

6 *Ibid.*, 23.

7 The core message of liberation theology can be found in the conclusion of Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*: “The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors. Liberation from every form of exploitation, the possibility of a more humane and dignified life, the creation of a new humankind - all pass through this struggle.” Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Cardad Imda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 174.

8 Beverley, *Subalternity*, 38.

9 *Ibid.*, 40.

10 David Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 1. Ludden clarifies that the italicized phrase Subaltern Studies refers to the series of edited volumes that appear under the full title, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* and that, without italics, Subaltern Studies refers to all the texts

of English and Indian historians, who were interested in history from below and insurgency in colonial India,¹¹ proposed to launch a new journal in India. Oxford University Press in New Delhi published a series of edited volumes entitled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* from 1982 until 1999. Its main editor was the Indian Marxist historian Ranajit Guha. According to Guha, the word “subaltern” stands for the meaning as “of inferior rank.”¹² For Guha, the concept of subaltern is based on binary division between subordination and domination. The term “subaltern” has been popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak through her monumental essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak considers subalterns the hidden, invisible, and marginalized people suffering in places where there are no human rights, and as such, she refers to subalterns as sub- or non-humans. In this sense, it is found that subaltern studies seeks to hear the people and their voices that have been silenced in the dominant discourses.

Scholars have suggested that since the 1960s, the dominant historical-critical approaches within the field of biblical studies have come to a relative standstill.¹³ Under the influence of literary criticism, the field of biblical studies¹⁴ has developed new approaches to the study of biblical literature. Among a variety of new approaches, one of the most profound influences is

inside and outside *Subaltern Studies* by authors in *Subaltern Studies*. Here, in my article, subaltern studies is a generic term that includes the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and the Latin America Subaltern Studies Group.

11 Ibid., 6.

12 Ranajit Guha, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds., Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35.

13 J. C. Robinson, “Narrative”, Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 236-237.

14 For the general understanding of research trends developed within the Old Testament studies, see Yoon Kyung Lee, “The Old Testament and Humanities: Reading the Old Testament from the Perspectives of History, Literary, and Philosophy”, *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 23,3 (2017), 140-171.

the postmodern ethos, which is “inclined to recognize much more complexity in the interaction of text and reader.”¹⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of “incredulity toward metanarratives”¹⁶ suggests the promotion of individuals’ “little stories” as a kind of campaign of resistance to grand narratives.¹⁷ Thus, shifting the focus from the center to the margins is one of the primary ways of reading in the postmodern critical approaches to literature. Looking toward the margins of the text and studying the characters who reside there gives the legitimacy to the subaltern as subjects for study.

Concerning literary studies of minor characters, it is helpful to explore theoretical principles developed by David Galef and Alex Woloch. In his book *The Supporting Cast: A Study of Flat and Minor Characters*, David Galef provides two important insights into a close reading of minor characters in the biblical text: (1) the significance of noting the presence of flat and minor characters in a story and (2) the reader’s role in recreating these characters. Galef’s main argument can be summarized in this statement: “The sheer insufficiency of the portrait of minor characters has a paradoxical effect: the less shown on the page, the more imaginative work that reader must do, writing in between the lines of the text.”¹⁸ Appealing to the necessity of both depth and a more prolonged analysis of these minor and flat characters, Galef concludes that “[m]inor characters, numbering a majority in their sheer multitude, represent a significant portion of the life in a novel, as well as the

15 A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 18.

16 *Ibid.*, 16.

17 Gina Hens-Piazza, “Lyotard”, A. K. M. Adam (ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 164.

18 David Galef, *The Supporting Cast: A Study of Flat and Minor Characters* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 3.

novelty in life.”¹⁹

Alex Woloch offers more in-depth research on minor and flat characters. Woloch defines the relationship between the protagonist and the minor characters as follows: “A narrative can organize its discursive universe into a referential core - the central condition of the protagonist - and a symbolic field that elaborates and nuances this core: the peripheral representations of minor characters.”²⁰ Woloch’s articulation of the feature of subordination of flat and minor characters clarifies the clear connection between subalternity and minorness. Noting that subordinate beings are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else, Woloch claims that “minor characters are the proletariat of the novel.”²¹ Furthermore, Woloch points out that “it is the disappearance of the minor character that, finally, is integrated into his or her interesting speech or memorable gesture.”²² Such a disappearance represents one of the features of subalternity, which is that it cannot stand on the center but is “overshadowed or absorbed into someone else’s story, swallowed within or expelled from another person’s plot.”²³ Hence, this makes it clear that the kinship between subaltern studies and minor character studies is reinforced by the disappearance of minor characters. Drawing upon the affinity between the features of subalternity that subaltern studies concerns and those of minor characters in literary studies, it is possible to designate minor (subordinate) characters as subaltern

19 Ibid., 25.

20 Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 18.

21 Ibid., 27.

22 Ibid., 38.

23 Ibid.

characters. By investigating subaltern characters in 2 Kings 7, this study aims to advocate solidarity with the marginalized people in our society.

3. A Subaltern Reading of 2 Kings 7:3-10 with focus on the Four Lepers

In this section, an examination of the four lepers in 2 Kings 7 as subaltern characters will be offered. Few studies have appeared thus far that deal with the Old Testament from the viewpoint of subaltern studies in Korean Old Testament scholarship.²⁴ Recent subaltern studies in Asian and Asian American scholars have revealed that understanding of many Old Testament passages can be enriched by reading them from the viewpoint of subaltern studies theorists, such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. Guha uses the terms “people” and “subaltern classes” synonymously.²⁵ Hence, the term “subaltern classes” can include not only the marginalized, impoverished peasants but also members of the populace who are subordinate to the ruling class. Spivak elaborates on silence as a characteristic of subalternity with her sharp and realistic view of subalterns who do not exist as humans in her monumental essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”²⁶ Bhabha’s concept of liminality derives from his critique of

24 See Seong Hee Kim, *Mark, Women and Empire: A Korean Postcolonial Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010). Except for several articles dealing with subaltern themes in the field of humanities, there is no substantial study that focuses on the Old Testament from this angle.

25 Guha, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 44.

26 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-111.

monolithic fixed categories.²⁷ This liminal space is where subalterns struggle for their identification. Their studies have shed a new light on certain Old Testament passages that could be otherwise ignored because they have succeeded in exposing the subtle dynamics between dominant characters and non-dominant characters with their role in fulfilling the will of God. In this regard, I will make an inquiry into 2 Kings 7 with focus on the four lepers as subaltern characters. It is hoped that this way of looking at the four lepers will help us to sense their ironically dominant role in the resolution of the national crisis in comparison to the king and the high ranking official. It is neither the king nor the high ranking official but the lepers who took the initiative in ending the devastating famine and siege by the enemy.

1) The Four Lepers Overshadowed by Major Characters and Their Religious Tradition in the Larger Context of 2 Kings 7

In this section, I will first analyze the “major” characters in the situation of 2 Kings 7 with attention to who will be instrumental in terminating the crisis. My textual analysis will be followed by subaltern interpretation of the “major”²⁸ characters. The central thesis of this article is that the role of the four lepers is best understood from the viewpoint of subaltern studies. Here are three evidences. First, subaltern studies allows us to pay serious attention to the four lepers whose subversive role has not received enough treatment in the history

27 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

28 What I mean by major is that the minor characters substantially play a major role in solving the problem. In fact, the four lepers can be called major characters in this episode, because they hold the most importance. However, for the commentators who consider the broader context of the Elisha cycle, the four lepers have been easily regarded as minor ones in the history of interpretation of 2 Kings 7. Thus, although the four lepers are the protagonists in this unit, they have been treated as minor characters in the conventional commentaries.

of exegesis of 2 Kings 7. Richard Nelson focuses on the ineffectiveness of royal power.²⁹ Marvin Sweeney highlights the inadequacy of the king and the house of Omri.³⁰ Robert L. Cohn has regarded the prophet Elisha as the centerpiece in the confrontation between the king and the prophet.³¹ Second, the reading of 2 Kings 7 from the subaltern angle complements the elitist tendency of the Deuteronomistic history³² that usually singled out the behavior and attitude of the ruling classes as if they were major factors in history-making event. Third, reading 2 Kings 7 with focus on the four lepers awakens us to the divine way of God in accomplishing God's redemptive will through obscure characters and minor characters, which reminds us of Paul's theology of the Cross as outlined in 1 Corinthians 1:27-31.

2 Kings 7:3-10 resides as an episode in the larger context of 2 Kings 6:24-7:20. Here, the fulfillment of the prophetic word of Yahweh and the ineffectiveness of royal power during the siege of Samaria preside as the themes. More immediately, placed after the scene of Elisha's prophetic word (v. 1), the narrative consists mainly of the characterization of four lepers who witnessed firsthand the deserted Aramean camp and became heralds of the good news.

In fact, 2 Kings 7:3 begins a new episode with the declarative sentence, "There were four men, lepers, outside the gate..." As Cohn indicates, when it comes to the Hebrew text, "Inverted subject-verb word order signals a new

29 Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1987), 191.

30 Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 312.

31 Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 48.

32 Concerning the study of Deuteronomistic History, see Eun-Woo Lee, "Recent Research Trend of the so-called Deuteronomistic History", *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 14.3 (2008), 67-86.

scene that starts narrated time afresh in a new location.”³³ Therefore, so as not to subordinate the lepers’ story as merely a subunit of the Elisha cycles that highlights the fulfillment of Elisha’s prophecy in verse 1, “And Elisha replied, ‘Hear the word of the LORD...,’” this study begins with verse 3. It aims to highlight the characteristics of subalternity embedded in the lepers. However, it does not intend to reinforce their subalternity by simply emphasizing several features of subalterns in the narrative analysis. Instead, it highlights positive aspects of the significance of the lepers as subaltern characters in the story. It spotlights the lepers so that readers can deeply empathize with the desperate situation of these subalterns. Moreover, readers can then grasp these characters’ capacity to bring about social change. By turning their attention from the center to the margin in the narrative, readers can hear the voice of the marginalized who were suffering from a severe famine.

Sitting outside the gate, the four lepers are in a miserable plight, facing imminent death. Expecting nothing but death, the lepers raise an objection to their fate (v. 3). Remarkably, they try to escape the impending doom even under such circumstances, dominated by despair and death. In order to survive, they decide to surrender themselves to the Arameans (v. 4). However, the lepers do not encounter the Arameans when they arrive in the camp. At twilight, when they reach the edge of the Aramean camp, they find nothing there (v. 5). The narrator reports that the LORD (Yahweh) caused the people in the Aramean camp to hear the sound of chariots and horses as if a large army were approaching. Since the Arameans thought that the king of Israel had hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight

33 See Cohn, *2 Kings*, 51; Burke O. Long, *2 Kings* (Forms of Old Testament Library; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 94. Long indicates that “a new scene, opening with inverted word order in the Hebrew, introduces the four lepers and their Pascal-like wager.” *Ibid.*

against them (v. 6), they fled headlong, abandoning their tents and horses and donkeys (v. 7). After the Arameans had deserted the camp, the lepers come to the edge of the camp and go around to the Arameans' tents, satisfying their hunger and thirst and gathering hidden treasures (v. 8). Feeling qualms about their behavior, they stop and analyze their new situation. Then they determine to apprise the king of Samaria of their discovery (v. 9). The episode ends with the lepers approaching the gatekeepers of the city to report what they have witnessed in the Aramean's camp (v. 10).

Although the larger literary context (2 Kgs 6:8-7:20) demonstrates Elisha's power over the king of Aram at Samaria, the four lepers sitting outside the gate to Samaria, which was under siege by the Arameans, qualify as other important characters. Nevertheless, the four lepers have been treated as minor characters in the history of interpretation. According to Woloch, a minor character refers to a subordinate being that plays a delimited functional role within the narrative.³⁴ This role features some degree of vanishing.³⁵ In other words, the minor character appears and disappears suddenly and disruptively within the plot. Since these four lepers appear and disappear on the scene all of a sudden, they are minor or subaltern characters within the entire Elijah-Elisha narratives. In addition, their physical characteristic of having leprosy makes them subalterns, the marginalized, the lowest of the low in the narrative world.

Drawing upon Guha's concept of the subaltern, the four lepers may be regarded as subalterns not only in the sense that they are a marginalized minority group because of their physical status of being leprous. They are

34 Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 25.

35 *Ibid.*, 40.

subalterns in the sense that they assume “political agency to become the subject of history.”³⁶ People suffering from a skin disease³⁷ in ancient Israel were considered to be unclean and were required to live outside of the community until they were cured (see Lev13:34-36; cf. Num 12:15).³⁸ They were excluded from the normal life of the city and left at its gates to beg or to perform undesirable tasks to make their living. They represented the lowest stratum of ancient Israelite society.³⁹ They bore the social stigma of marginalized and ostracized persons.⁴⁰ A common, natural aversion toward skin diseases may be found universally in unrelated cultures, and the rationale behind it can be explained by a theory of impurity: what is considered impure is largely that which is irregular or out of place. Against the norm of whole, healthy skin, skin diseases are abnormal; hence, people with skin diseases are

36 Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 352-356. According to Young, “Gramsci uses the term ‘subaltern’ interchangeably with ‘subordinate’ and ‘instrumental’ in his class analyses. For Gramsci, subalterns are the in-between class - the lieutenants of the ruling class as opposed to the mass. However, Guha extends this account to characterize subalternity as the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society. Guha uses the terms ‘people’ and ‘subaltern classes’ synonymously. Guha’s intervention provided the decisive theoretical and conceptual reformulation, the concept of the subaltern ascribed a new dynamic political agency to those who had formerly been described as the wretched of the earth, the oppressed and the dispossessed. By means of the subaltern the oppressed assumed political agency to become the subject of history, no longer its abject object.” Ibid., 355.

37 David P. Wright, “Leprosy”, Mark Allan Powell (ed.), *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 548. According to Wright, “Leprosy, in the Bible, is a disorder affecting humans, fabrics, and houses. Though it is not clear what all of these disorders were, it is certain that they were not modern leprosy (Hansen’s disease), which did not exist in the ancient Near East. The ‘leprosy’ that occurred in fabrics and houses is described as displaying greenish or reddish spots (Lev. 13:49; 14:37), indicating a type of mold or mildew. The ailment affecting humans may have included a wide variety of skin diseases.” Ibid.

38 Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 312.

39 Ibid.

40 Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 276.

shunned,⁴¹

We know nothing about why these four lepers became lepers, but it is not difficult to imagine how they were treated by their neighbors. The four lepers might have been stigmatized as not only unclean⁴² but also as the cursed.⁴³ This explains why they had to live alone, outside their residential area. Given that one of the characteristics of a group of subalterns is that they are displaced from their traditional habitat,⁴⁴ these four lepers as a displaced group qualify as subalterns.

The lepers' social status as subalterns is indisputable. However, most commentators have not tried to listen to these lepers' voices nor tried to analyze their will or consciousness about resistance and change that is detectable in their speech. Instead, these traits are silenced. Yet, their speech in v. 3, when probed closely, reveals an element of negation. Guha argues that negation is a struggle to negate the exploitation and tyranny of the ruling

41 David P. Wright and Richard N. Jones, "Leprosy", *ABD* 4:281.

42 Leviticus 13:45 reads "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out Unclean, Unclean" (NRSV). It is the scholarly consensus that the uncleanness derived from skin diseases like leprosy is confined in the ritual and religious dimension. In other words, being leprous has nothing to do with moral impurity. It is just the state of ritual impurity. However, the symbolic behavior required for the lepers to do has an implication that brings shame upon them, and as such, that results in justifying segregation.

43 Throughout the Old Testament, it is obvious that being leprous indicates a symbol of divine curse and punishment. For example, in the episode of Numbers 12:1-10, Miriam and Aaron had become leprous as a result of God's wrath because they spoke against God's servant Moses. Lamentations 4:11-15 also implies the idea that being leprous is a state of being punished. Lamentations 4:15 reads "Away! Unclean! people shouted at them, Away, Away, Do not touch! so they became fugitives and wanderers: it was said among the nations, They shall stay here no longer" (NRSV).

44 See Francis Gonsalves, *God of Our Soil: Toward Subaltern Trinitarian Theology* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2010), 74-77. Gonsalves notes that subalterns "are not only denied their rights as equal citizens of the country, but pushed toward extinction as community, thus the subaltern groups are geographically, quite literally, 'marginal' in the nation-space." Also, he adds that subaltern communities are usually displaced from their traditional habitat. *Ibid.*, 75.

elites in the colonial situation.⁴⁵ Ultimately it represents a striving by the subalterns to preserve their right to survive. The lepers' will to annul their negative situation includes not only their subalternity formed by means of segregation and avoidance by the clean but also ultimately the current national crisis of the famine that is threatening their very existence. Hence, in that sense, the lepers' speech in v. 3, "Why should we sit here waiting for death?," discloses their negation, an element of subaltern consciousness.

2) The Lepers' Fatalistic yet Foreseeing Strategy

At this very critical juncture the lepers try to find a way out of their negative situation, i.e., to survive, which corresponds with their determination to live. The attempt to negate the negative circumstance of the famine is not the same thing as a revolt of the peasantry (as Guha illustrated), but they are starting a revolution, at least within their inner minds, to overcome their current negative situation. Their initial question launches the revolution. Through this oration, they reveal their desire to reject the current situation and create an alternative reality.

However, soon after this, the lepers expose their fatalistic philosophy by saying "If we say, 'Let us enter the city,' the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; but if we sit here, we shall also die. Therefore, let us desert to the Aramean camp; if they spare our lives, we shall live; and if they kill us, we

45 See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 18-76. Guha explains the concept of negation, which is the foundational element of peasant insurgency. According to Guha, "the lower classes, historically on the defensive, Gramsci writes, can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negation, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy." *Ibid.*, 20. Guha argues that the peasant recognized his subalternity as negative one, which he strove to end. Thus, the negative recognition of subalternity ends up functioning as departure point for the transition toward inversion. Guha's exposition of negation offers an insight that can be applied to the lepers' awareness of a dire situation that they are facing.

shall but die” (v. 4). They decide to cast their fate into the hands of those whom they might identify as their superiors.⁴⁶ Fatalism leads to their insistence on remaining subordinate to their superiors. At this juncture, the lepers betray their inclination to hold a fatalistic view of their current situation. With resignation, they appear to be ready to acquiesce to whatever the Arameans decide.

The lepers’ decision to surrender to a hostile nation leads us to surmise how desperate and frustrated they would have felt about their situation. Also it discloses how thoroughly they were abandoned by their neighbors, since it appears that they do not have a sense of belongingness in their own habitat. Furthermore, their decision to surrender to the Aramean army demonstrates the radicality that the subalterns possess. This radicality is a characteristic of subalterns.⁴⁷ However, more importantly, it is significant to note where they are sitting, that is, outside the city. This suggests the possibility of their coming to a free and radical decision.

The place where the lepers are sitting forms a telling contrast with where the residents are staying. The residents in the city cannot get out of the city because the Aramean army has held the city under siege. They might not even be thinking about ways to escape the closed city. Indeed, they are confined in the city not only physically but also probably mentally because

46 Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings* (New American Commentary; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 280. House comments that “these men reason that the Syrians will kill them if the siege is effective, so they decide to cast themselves on the enemy’s mercy.” Ibid.

47 See C. I. David Joy, *Mark and Its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008), 53-54. Joy quotes Felix Wilfred, a proponent of subaltern biblical hermeneutics, who discusses the application of subaltern studies to biblical literature. Wilfred, writing in 1996, notes the radicality of subalterns, saying that “the situation of the forced marginalization and powerlessness of the subaltern is bound to have radicality in religious interpretation which cannot be expected from the dominant hermeneutics.” Ibid., 54.

they assume that they are unable to flee from the city. In contrast, the lepers are sitting outside the gate, namely, in the in-between or third space, which is neither fixed nor closed but open and fluid.⁴⁸ That is why they can make such a liberal and radical decision, which is to defect to the enemy.

This in-between space where the lepers are sitting leads us to think about the implications of marginality. Jung Young Lee, quoting Robert Park and Everett Stonequist, discusses a classical self-negating outlook of marginal people.⁴⁹ He notes that marginal people live in between two hostile worlds, neither of which wants them. He states, “To be in-between two worlds means to be fully in neither. The marginal person who is placed between this two-world boundary feels like a non-being. This existential nothingness caused by the perspective of two (or more) dominant worlds is a root of dehumanization.”⁵⁰ Lee’s reflection on the existential nothingness of the marginalized echoes the self-negative recognition of the subaltern consciousness. Moreover, Lee goes on to say that the sense of alienation, of not belonging wholly to this world or that world, causes the marginal to become powerless and invisible people.⁵¹ However, as Lee puts it, “Marginal people cannot be exclusivists.”⁵² Rather, they are “inclusive and open to all centers”⁵³ because they live in the margin. Thus, Lee suggests a self-affirming definition of the new marginal person as a liberated person, a person who

48 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 5.

49 Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 32.

50 *Ibid.*, 45.

51 *Ibid.*, 56, 58.

52 *Ibid.*, 50.

53 *Ibid.*

is truly free.⁵⁴ I will examine whether the lepers in this narrative are newly marginal people at the end of the analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the lepers' determination to surrender to the Arameans is seen as a lack of *amor patriae* (patriotism) and as a betrayal of their nation. Ironically, they end up saving the nation by deserting the nation. Eventually, in this dire situation in which mothers were cannibalizing their own children inside the city (2 Kgs 6:24-29), it would have been a sensible decision for the king to desert to the Arameans. In this sense, the lepers appear more rational and realistic than the king.

In verse 5, the narrator describes the lepers' arrival at the Aramean camp and what they see there. Comparing the lepers' defection to the Aramean camp at twilight with the Arameans' journey to Dothan at twilight (2 Kings 6:13), Keith Bodner notes that "both scenes feature surprising reversals and unanticipated horses and chariots."⁵⁵ Also, Bodner argues that there is a sense of simultaneity in the common use of "at twilight"⁵⁶ and states that "at twilight the lepers arise after debating whether to abandon Samaria, while at the same time the Arameans were deciding to abandon their camp."⁵⁷ Furthermore, he indicates that "the verb "arise" (קוּם) is used for the action of both parties; when the lepers arise to begin their surrender, the Arameans arise to depart in haste" (vv. 5 and 7).⁵⁸ Rick Dale Moore notes these similarities between the lepers and the Arameans. He points out that when the Aramean soldiers are

54 Ibid., 63.

55 Keith Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 121.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

dismayed at the sound of chariots and horses in the night, “self-destructive panic is avoided as ‘each spoke to his brother.’”⁵⁹ Similarly, the lepers “each said to his companion . . .” (v. 3). In addition, Moore goes on to say that the actions of both parties are associated with saving their lives.⁶⁰ Viewing the Aramean soldiers’ dialogue positively, as mutually supportive compared to that of the lepers, supports an interpretation of this episode through the lens of subaltern biblical hermeneutics.

Regarding the interpretation of these Aramean soldiers, it is difficult to find commentators who pay attention to them and address their affinity with the lepers. Instead, some scholars treat them as the enemy and as oppressors of Samaria.⁶¹ Yet, taking into account the realities of war, the Aramean soldiers are also regarded as subalterns who were victimized in wartime. As Brueggemann articulates, “War is conducted by the men of power. For them, the war is standard operational procedure to sustain the long-standing hostility between the two state We have no hint that either of the kings suffered or was even inconvenienced by the war. War-makers tend to live outside the consequences of their actions.”⁶² In wartime, it is the subaltern group of people, including soldiers and civilians, that becomes the dispensable, disposable people. In that sense, the Aramean soldiers can be categorized as subalterns along with the lepers, although the lepers would have identified them as their superiors. In addition, these Aramean soldiers function as minor or subaltern characters since they play a disruptive role within the narrative.

59 Rick Dale Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 98.

60 Ibid.

61 See Long, *2 Kings*, 95; House, *1, 2 Kings*, 280.

62 Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 361.

Indeed, the lepers and the Aramean soldiers have subordination in common within the plot. Here, it is evident that subaltern biblical interpretation helps us to be more inclusive and empathic. Most commentators either neglect the Arameans soldiers' presence or antagonize the Aramean soldiers as the enemy of Israel. However, drawing on subaltern biblical hermeneutics, we find that these Arameans are victimized or delimited as disposable characters in the narrative, and furthermore, in reality, the soldiers who we assume are our enemies—because of the propagandistic nationalist approach to war and international politics that promotes enmity against other countries—are not the enemy. Instead, they are victims of a war that was initiated by the leaders of a certain nation for the benefit and interest of a certain group of people. Subaltern biblical interpretation allows us to see the reality and the truth behind the surface.

Returning to the perspective of the lepers, then, we see that, unexpectedly, the Aramean camp had become empty in a mysterious way.

For the LORD had caused the Aramean army to hear the sound of chariots, and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "The king of Israel has hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight against us." So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys leaving the camp just as it was, and fled for their lives. (2 Kings 7:6-7).

Verses 6-7 attribute the Arameans leaving their camp to God's intervention. Historical critics have assumed that vv. 6-7 are a later insertion.⁶³ Also, literary

63 Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, Anselm Hagedorn (trans.) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 268. Fritz mentions that "a larger interpolation is the passage about the prophet in 6:32-7:2 between the first and second scenes. A later hand again added the explanation of the silence reigning over the camp of the

critics note that vv. 6-7 offer a flashback and that the two verses are bracketed by the repeated phrase “when they [the leprous men] came to the edge of the Aramean camp” in verses 5 and 8.⁶⁴ Indeed, without verses 6-7, it seems that there is no problem in terms of the flow of time in the story of the lepers’ survival of the famine. Yet, because of these two verses, we come to know the reason why the Aramean army fled.

Moreover, the Arameans’ dialogue in verse 6 suggests an anti-Omride sentiment in this story. We are told that the Arameans said to one another, “the king of Israel has hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight against us” (v. 6). Regarding this verse, in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars were interested in the historical reconstruction of the siege of Samaria. Scholars discussed the point in history when such a siege could actually have taken place for over a century but could not reconstruct the exact historical setting.⁶⁵ Nelson understands the noise of God’s horses and chariots throwing the Arameans into an irrational panic in light of the traditional concept of God’s holy war; in his view, it had no historical grounding.⁶⁶ Cohn views the reference to the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians as a literary expression referring to Israel’s powerful alliance by associating Israel with the supernatural army in the earlier tale of the Arameans surrounding Elisha in 2 Kings 6:15-17.⁶⁷ Overall, the consensus of scholars is that the reference to the Hittite and Egyptian kings in this context makes no historical sense.

Arameans in 7:6-7.”

64 Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 190.

65 Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 84; August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 449-450.

66 Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 190.

67 Cohn, *2 Kings*, 51-52.

In light of the rhetorical aspect, the reference to the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt is reminiscent of the portrayal of Solomon's military superiority, including the equipping of large chariot forces from Egypt as well as their being exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram in 1 Kings 10:28-29.⁶⁸ Echoing the Solomonic reinforcement of military power in this narrative context of a severe famine, the narrator is likely hinting at a censure of the Omride dynasty's expansion of armaments and the resultant starvation of its subjects. Ahab's concern for his horses in time of drought and famine exemplifies the Omride dynasty's focus on getting more armaments while neglecting the plight of its subjects who were suffering from a famine (1 Kings 18:5). A sociocultural analysis of Israel of the ninth century B.C.E. supports the conjecture that the militarization was one cause of the severe starvation. The Omride dynasty's prosperity was achieved at the expense of the complete alienation of several groups of its subjects.⁶⁹ During the reign of the Omrides, the elites who directed the society's production and redistribution strategies were not concerned with policies that would sustain all the members of the society; instead, they were concerned with their own opulent lifestyle.⁷⁰ Thus, the failure to take care of the welfare of the nation's subjects came to full fruition under Jehoram. The war with Ben-Hadad drained the nation of men and money, and as a result the frustration of the various classes who had suffered under the Omride regime began to build to

68 1 Kings 10:28-29 is as follows: "Solomon's import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king's traders received them from Kue at a price. A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred fifty; so through the king's traders they were exported to all the kings of Hittites and the kings of Aram" (NRSV).

69 Tamis Hoover Rentería, "The Elijah/Elisha Stories: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Prophets and People in Ninth-Century B.C.E. Israel", Robert B. Coote (ed.), *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 86.

70 Ibid.

an explosive level.⁷¹

Even though the discussion of the correlation between militarization and starvation needs further examination, the social background of this story allows us to surmise that there may have been a close association between these two phenomena. Here, it is notable that famine does not affect everyone in a society to the same extent. According to Amartya Sen,

While famines involve fairly widespread acute starvation, there is no reason to think that it will affect all groups in the famine-affected nation. Indeed, it is by no means clear that there has ever occurred a famine in which all groups in a country have suffered from starvation, since different groups typically do have very different commanding powers over food, and an over-all shortage brings out the contrasting powers in stark clarity.⁷²

Simply put, Sen's argument is that food shortages have the most serious impact on the lower economic classes because there is inequality with regard to the entitlement to the food. Hence, in a time of famine, it is the most vulnerable people, who are restricted in their access to food, who are victimized most severely. Also, in the midst of war, the governing authorities extract grain harvests for the creation of official reserves, which reduces the grain supplies available for the peasantry. Moreover, since "soldiers and civilians vital to the prosecution of war always are fed first,"⁷³ it is obvious that the lepers in 2 Kings would have had to suffer from severe food deprivation,

71 Ibid., 87.

72 Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 43.

73 Arline T. Golkin, *Famine: A Heritage of Hunger* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1987), 20.

Against the backdrop of these dire conditions, we are told that Yahweh took an action to deliver primarily the lepers but also the rest of the citizens of Samaria who were dying of hunger. The dominant interpretation is that the divine action indicates the fulfillment of Elisha's prophetic word in v. 1 and that the lepers function as an instrumental part of Yahweh's salvation.⁷⁴ All commentators acknowledge that the lepers played a vital role in Yahweh's deliverance of the Israelites from starvation. However, across the tradition of interpretation, scholars have rarely noted that the divine action took place for the sake of the lepers. No one highlights the fact that the primary and immediate beneficiaries of the divine salvation were the lepers.⁷⁵ Without an awareness of the importance of minor characters, however, we cannot fully consider God's miraculous intervention as an event that occurred to benefit the lepers. Since the lepers have not been treated as important figures, commentators have not regarded God's deliverance of the lepers as a definite experience for the lepers; rather, they have functionalized it and thus effaced the significance of the lepers. Indeed, subaltern biblical hermeneutics allows readers to be more aware of the people in the margin and more considerate and supportive of those characters who are easily neglected.

Viewing this divine intervention as primarily intended to save the lepers suggests that God directly cares for and stands up for the lowest class (the subalterns) whom the ruler fails to protect. It indicates that Yahweh, the supreme patrimonial lord of the Israelite social hierarchy,⁷⁶ sides with the

74 See Moore, *God Saves*, 96-104; Terence E. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 160; Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 359-363.

75 Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 362-363. Brueggemann emphasizes the twin efforts of Yahweh and the lepers. He says, "The ruse of Yahweh's sounds would be incomplete without the reporting lepers." *Ibid.*, 363.

76 King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 5.

subalterns. In other words, Yahweh vindicates the outcasts, in contrast to the conventional ethos of ancient Israelite society. In that sense, this episode illustrates an axiom of liberation theology, of which the central point is the “preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.” Taking a subordinate character as the central figure is the way subaltern biblical hermeneutics works. Here, it is necessary to recall that Beverly refers to subaltern studies as a secular version of liberation theology. Therefore, it is inevitable that subaltern biblical hermeneutics shares identical theological concerns with liberation theology.

In verse 8, as Long notes, the repeated framing motif, “and these lepers came to the edge of the camp” resumes the flow of time,⁷⁷ and the scene of the lepers’ looting silver, gold, and clothing from the Aramean tents unfolds. Shortly after they eat their fill and plunder the camp, feeling guilty, the lepers stop and begin to think that they are obliged to inform the king’s court of their good fortune. They say to one another “We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent! If we wait until the light of morning, we shall incur guilt. Come, let us go and inform the king’s palace” (v. 9). Here, they recognize that they were keeping silent. Silence is one of the characteristics of subalterns. By breaking their silence, they challenge their subalternity. Their behavior of breaking their silence can be understood as part of the process by which they become agents of social change. This is the crucial moment because they decide to have a significant impact on the community, although the people in the community have abandoned them,

⁷⁷ Long, *2 Kings*, 94.

3) A Fresh Look at the Lepers as Agent of Social Change

Although their social status is still subaltern, their consciousness and their sense of responsibility become like the deity's (the most high) through the mysterious, unexpected, and fortuitous event they experienced. Indeed, the lepers' unexpected deliverance is interesting because they did not pray or appeal to God for any help. Only the reader knows the full story about how they were saved from death. The lepers became God's agents to honor the plan of heaven by making the decision to inform the starving people inside the city of the good news. Thus, the lepers' inclination to take care of others turned them into agents for the deliverance of the entire city from the catastrophic crisis.

Earlier, quoting Lee's comment on the new self-affirming understanding of marginal people, I have drawn attention to the question of whether these lepers could be regarded as new marginal people. The lepers became newly liberated marginal people. Although their social status as subalterns did not change, they became free from their self-serving desire to survive alone, from their hatred or resentment toward the citizens in Samaria who had probably treated them badly, as well as from destitution through their possession of gold, silver, and clothing, which people with high rank in society have, even though it was only temporary. The lepers' decision to inform the king's palace of the good news, and ultimately the citizens of Samaria, could suggest that they continue to seek to liberate themselves from the dehumanization and alienation they had suffered because of their exclusion from their community.

According to Wilfred, "Dalits represent the hope for the future because in their aspirations and dreams we already see the shape of the things to come

for a just and egalitarian society.”⁷⁸ The term Dalits refers to the people who are called untouchables in Indian society.⁷⁹ If we identify Dalits as subalterns, the same phrase that Wilfred used can be applied to subalterns. Subalterns represent the hope for a just and egalitarian society. Also, of all the concepts related to subalterns, Guha places special emphasis on the subject of history, meaning the subject of social transformation who has hope for a just and egalitarian society. Thus, the story of the four lepers demonstrates that subalterns can be the subjects who make decisions always in the hope of better existence possible for a just and egalitarian society by contributing to the rescue of the people in the city who were starving during the famine.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this close reading of 2 Kings 7:3-10 with attention to the four lepers suggests three outcomes. First, by focusing on the lepers, this study tries to hear their side of the story. Viewing the people on the periphery in the narrative helps us to consider the marginalized people surrounding us as important and encourages us to recognize that every individual is a valuable and indispensable protagonist in the story of their own life. Second, this analysis intends to raise awareness of the marginalized who have undergone

78 Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xxiv.

79 Ibid., 9. According to Wilfred, “the Dalit people have taken to reject the derogatory terms, [Untouchable] with which they were referred to for so long. From ‘Untouchable’ to ‘Dalit’ expresses the journey of a people from humiliation to dignity and self-confidence. ‘Untouchables’ evokes the feeling of exclusion on the basis of the ideology of purity and pollution. It creates a mental block towards the excluded people, and it even reinforces this exclusion. On the other hand, ‘Dalits’ evokes the experience of an oppressed people and their suffering. It invites inclusion. With the change of terminology it is possible that at least some layers of prejudice could be shed, though the struggle to eradicate it completely must continue.” Ibid.

unspeakable suffering in our current reality. It leads us to be more attentive to the hardship of the lowest of the low in our society. Third, this project attempts to highlight that subalterns are subjects who make decisions in the hope of making a better existence possible in a just and egalitarian society. Paying attention to the subaltern characters, the four lepers in the narrative, with the yearning for a more democratic, inclusive, and nonhierarchical society offers a promising implication of this study. This subaltern biblical interpretation provides a framework for how to listen to the excluded voices of subalterns and how to be in solidarity with them in our Bible reading.

In a similar vein, this subaltern biblical reading shares some theological perspectives with Minjung theology, in that it emphasizes minjung (people) as subject of historical transformation in the Korean reality. As mentioned earlier, in the narrative world, minor characters on the periphery are understood as the people in the communist sense of the proletariat. According to Yeong-Mee Lee, Minjung theology provides a hermeneutical frame that highlights social biography of God's people and God's factionalism, that is, God with God's people who are the socially weak in the Bible.⁸⁰ She argues that the uniqueness of Minjung theology is its recognition of minjung as the subject of history and its emphasis on their great capability. In this sense, Minjung theology corresponds to subaltern biblical interpretation that I have suggested above. However, subaltern biblical reading differs from Minjung theology. Lee mentions that Minjung theology uses Minjung history, culture, and the Bible for its theological references. To be more specific, she says, the scripture for Minjung theology is the scene of revelation where people's social

80 Yeong-Mee Lee, "Overture for a Minjung Old Testament Theology - Theology of Job as an Example", *The Theological Thought* 131 (2005): 29-56.

biography is discovered. Thus, revelation is not confined in the Bible only, but it takes place in history, society, and culture as well. These three elements (Minjung history, culture, and the Bible) are accepted as equal scriptural sources for theologians to understand God's salvific history. Unlike Minjung theology that tends to regard the Bible as proof-text, subaltern biblical reading focuses on biblical text in and of itself, and as such, it is an alternative way of reading, rather than a certain form of systematic theology.

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Keywords

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열왕기하 7장의 서벌턴 캐릭터인 네 명의 나병환자들에 대한 하나의 새로운 시각

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이 논문은 열왕기하 7장의 등장인물인 네 명의 나병환자들에 대한 새로운 읽기를 제공한다. 열왕기하 7장, 사마리아의 포위 상태에 대한 이야기는 오므리 왕조의 무능력과 부적합함을 잘 예증하는 내러티브로서 읽혀왔다. 하지만 이 주제에 관심이 있는 학자들은 이 이야기의 잘 인식되지 않는, 그러나 결정적으로 중요한 측면을 간과해왔다. 왕과 예언자들 같은 주요한 인물들로부터 조연(minor character)들에게로 시선을 옮기면 어떤 이야기를 발견할 수 있을까? 이것이 본 연구의 출발점이다. 엘리트 중심의 역사 담론을 비판하며 아래로부터의 역사와 서벌턴(subaltern, 하위 주체)을 사회 변혁의 주체로 제시하는 서벌턴 연구는 존 비벌리에 따르면 사회의 평등과 해방이라는 명분에 헌신된 사람들이 공동 작업하는 동맹 정치의 학문적 형태로 일컬어진다. 그는 서벌턴 연구가 '가난한 자들에 대한 우선적 선택'이라는 해방신학의 주요한 개념

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의 세속적 버전이라고 주장한다. 이러한 서벌턴 연구의 주변인들에 대한 관심은 한 내러티브안에서 이야기의 줄거리를 전개시키기 위해 이용되는, 혹은 주연을 돋보이게 하는 문학적 장치 정도로 취급되는, 유의미한 주목을 받지 못하고, 그저 읽고 지나치게 되는 조연들에 대한 관심과 일맥상통하는 면이 있다. 이러한 점에 착안하여, 본 연구는 서벌턴 연구와 조연들에 대한 문학적 연구를 바탕으로 열왕기하 7장, 특히 3-10절에 등장하는 인물들인 나병환자들에 대한 자세한 읽기를 시도하였다. 이 논문은 당시 나병환자들이 겪어야 했던 차별과 배제에 대해 자세히 주목함으로써, 한 사회에서 없는 존재처럼 여겨지는, 어디에도 속하지 못하는, 가장 연약한 자들이 하나님의 구원의 우선적 수혜자라는 점을 강조한다. 또한 사마리아의 기근으로 인한 극심한 물가폭등이 하나님의 구원을 경험한 나병환자들에 의해 해결된다는 점에서, 서벌턴에게 있는 사회 변혁적 힘에 주목한다. 이러한 서벌턴 중심의 읽기를 본 연구에서는 서벌턴 성서 해석이라고 명명하였고, 본 논문 전체를 통해 이 서벌턴 성서 해석을 예증하고자 하였다.

검색어

열왕기하

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